

# **Epistemic self-esteem of philosophers in the face of philosophical disagreement**

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**Abstract:** Our paper consists of four parts. In the first part, we describe the challenge of the pervasive and permanent philosophical disagreement over philosophers' epistemic self-esteem. In the second part, we investigate the attitude of philosophers who have high epistemic self-esteem even in the face of philosophical disagreement and who believe they have well-grounded philosophical knowledge. In the third section, we focus on the attitude of philosophers who maintain a moderate level of epistemic self-esteem because they do not attribute substantive philosophical knowledge to themselves but still believe that they have epistemic right to defend substantive philosophical beliefs. In the fourth section, we analyse the attitude of philosophers who have a low level of epistemic self-esteem in relation to substantive philosophical beliefs and make no attempt to defend those beliefs.

We argue that when faced with philosophical disagreement philosophers either have to deny that the dissenting philosophers are their epistemic peers or have to admit that doing philosophy is less meaningful than it seemed before. In this second case, philosophical activity and performance should not contribute to the philosophers' overall epistemic self-esteem to any significant extent.

**Keywords:** disagreement, equilibrium, metaphilosophy, self-esteem, scepticism

## **1. The problem**

Definitions of central philosophical notions such as “knowledge”, “truth”, “meaning” and “causality” are strongly disputed, and self-esteem is no exception. Nonetheless, the literature contains several minimalist definitions of self-esteem which could provide an appropriate starting point for enquiry. Let us take the following one.

In its most complete state, self-esteem is the summary judgment of every thing a person can assess about him/herself. Those judgments concern: (1) who one is (i.e. one's philosophy of life and character); (2) what one does (i.e. one's tangible and/or intangible work products regarding people, nature, objects, or oneself); (3) what one has (i.e. one's inherent, developed, or acquired qualities and quantities); (4) the different levels in how one appears (i.e. one's physical body, personality, and reputation); and (5) to whom or what one is

attached (e.g. God, a concept, a “special” person or group, money, possessions, or power).  
(Bailey 2003, 389-390)

Some philosophers interpret the notion of self-esteem more narrowly and differentiate it from the notion of self-respect.

One way of distinguishing them is by their grounds and the points of view from which they are appraised. Evaluative self-respect involves an assessment from a moral point of view of one’s character and conduct, while self-esteem can be based on personal features that are unrelated to character, and the assessment it involves need not be from a moral point of view: one can have a good opinion of oneself in virtue of being a good joke-teller or having won an important sports competition and yet not think one is a good person because of it. (Dillon 2018)

There is a sub-type of non-morally interpreted self-esteem which we call *epistemic self-esteem*. Insofar as one takes Bailey’s definition given above and applies it to the notion of epistemic self-esteem, she gets the following definition of epistemic self-esteem:

In its most complete state, epistemic self-esteem is the summary assessment<sup>1</sup> of everything a person can assess about him/herself. Those assessments concern: (1) who one is as an epistemic agent (i.e. the aim and relevance of her epistemic endeavor, and the features of her epistemic character); (2) what one does (i.e. one’s epistemic successes, attempts, and failures regarding personal or social epistemic endeavors, producing knowledge, justification, achieving understanding and so forth); (3) what one has (i.e. one’s inherent, developed, or acquired epistemic qualities and quantities); (4) the different levels in how one appears (i.e. one’s epistemic performances, role, and reputation); and (5) to whom or what one is attached as an epistemic agent (e.g. God, an ideology, a “special” epistemic authority, a research project, etc.).

Furthermore, it is worth distinguishing the epistemic agent’s *overall* epistemic self-esteem, which is the *summary* assessment of *everything* a person can epistemically assess about him/herself, from the

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<sup>1</sup> We have replaced “judgment” with “assessment” because, although Bailey uses the term neutrally, one of the most important debates about self-esteem is whether it is a form of judgment, belief, emotion, or experience.

narrower type of epistemic self-esteem, which is based *solely* on what kind of *epistemic status* the agent attributes to her beliefs.

Let us focus on the latter. There are different levels of epistemic *self-esteem* (as is the case with other kinds of self-esteem): high, moderate and low. An epistemic agent who attributes epistemic *authority* to herself in respect of a proposition  $p$  has *high* epistemic self-esteem concerning  $p$ . In other words, an agent who has *high* epistemic self-esteem concerning belief  $p$  considers herself to have the epistemic right to expect others to believe  $p$ . In contrast, an agent with *moderate* epistemic self-esteem does not regard herself as an *epistemic authority*; that is, she does not consider herself to have the epistemic right to expect others to believe  $p$ . But, at the same time, she still regards herself as an epistemic agent who has the epistemic right to publicly and sincerely defend belief in  $p$ . Finally, an epistemic agent with *low* self-esteem, even if she believes  $p$ , does not regard herself as having the epistemic right to sincerely and publicly defend belief in  $p$ .<sup>2</sup>

Where philosophers are concerned, the problem of epistemic self-esteem arises as follows. There is *no* consensus among philosophers about how substantive philosophical problems should be solved since philosophers have failed to present arguments which could establish an epistemically appropriate and stable consensus. As Peter van Inwagen puts it: “[t]here are no knock-down arguments or demonstrations or proofs in philosophy—not at any rate of substantive, positive theses” (van Inwagen 2016, p. 4) and “[i]f there is any philosophical theses that all or most philosophers affirm, it is a negative thesis: that formalism is not the right philosophy of mathematics, for example, or that

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<sup>2</sup> Some discuss the problem of epistemic self-esteem (or self-respect) in terms of credences and probabilities. That is to say, they are interested in the relation between rational self-respect and probabilistic credences in propositions or beliefs (see, for instance, Christensen 2007). In contrast to that approach, we investigate self-esteem in relation to attributing different kinds of epistemic authority to oneself because that better fits our focus, which is the relation between the lack of consensus and the epistemic agent’s self-esteem. Note that, even in the literature on credences, it is taken for granted that if  $S$  regards the disagreeing agent as a reliable expert or epistemic peer,  $S$  should reduce her credence in the disputed proposition to some extent unless she devalues the epistemic status of the disagreeing agent. Another relevant problem, which we do not discuss, is how the first-person perspective of one’s beliefs and other agents’ evaluation of these beliefs interact with each other. Since epistemic self-esteem seems to be a form of “substantive self-knowledge” (Cassam 2014); or in other words, since epistemic self-esteem is not merely a matter of indirect “first-person”-type knowledge about what kind of belief one has but has a lot to do with how one evaluates her performance as an epistemic agent and how other people evaluate her performance as an epistemic agent, the interaction of the first person authoritative and the intersubjective dimension is rather complicated. It is plausible that epistemic self-respect is in part based on inferential knowledge (Cassam 2014, Chapter 13; but see Gomes 2018 about the importance of correctly identifying the difference between inferential and perceptual knowledge). Moreover, the way in which an agent’s epistemic self-esteem is shaped by other agents’ judgements can vary from agent to agent. For example, some scholars have shown that agents with high versus low epistemic self-esteem react differently to other people’s feedback (see Hoplock et al. 2019).

knowledge is not (simply) justified, true belief” (van Inwagen 2004, p. 334-335).<sup>3</sup> Even philosophers with high epistemic self-esteem have failed to convince the community of philosophers (a term we use loosely to refer to the group of people who can be considered qualified philosophers whatever ‘qualified’ means) that they have substantive philosophical knowledge. And that failure poses a challenge to attribute knowledge to themselves and maintain their high epistemic self-esteem concerning their substantive philosophical belief.<sup>4</sup>

In our paper, we attempt to map how and in what sense philosophers can maintain epistemic self-esteem concerning substantive philosophical beliefs in light of the pervasive and permanent disagreement. The first option of any philosopher is for her to restore her *high* epistemic self-esteem by attributing philosophical knowledge to herself and devaluing the epistemic status of the dissenting philosophers (Section 2). The second option is for the philosopher to admit that she does not have (and cannot have) substantive philosophical knowledge whilst insisting on the idea that she has the epistemic right to maintain and defend her philosophical beliefs. That is, a philosopher can downgrade her self-esteem concerning substantive philosophical beliefs to a *moderate* level when faced with disagreement (Section 3). The third option is for the philosopher to accept a *low* level of epistemic self-esteem concerning substantive philosophical beliefs. By selecting that option, the philosopher does not regard herself as someone who has the epistemic right to maintain and sincerely defend substantive philosophical beliefs. Thus, she can only *accept* certain substantive philosophical propositions in the sense that she can further elaborate her preferred theories and professionally argue in favour of them without deeper commitment (Section 4). In addition to outlining the three options, we map the main difficulties of each approach in relation to the problem of epistemic self-esteem.

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<sup>3</sup> That there is a pervasive and enduring disagreement in philosophy is compellingly evident from David Bourget’s and David Chalmers’s survey of philosophers’ beliefs (see Bourget & Chalmers 2014). As they put it: “there is no [...] consensus in the answers given to the most important philosophical questions” (Bourget & Chalmers 2013, p. 31), moreover “philosophers hold [...] false beliefs about their colleagues’ views” (Bourget & Chalmers 2013, p. 29).

<sup>4</sup> Of course, we do not claim that the community of philosophers does not affirm any self-attribution of philosophical knowledge or that no-one has any kind of philosophical knowledge. We are merely claiming that if all the *consensually* endorsed philosophical truths were printed in a textbook, the book would only run to a few dozen pages. What would it contain? First, it would contain trivialities (such as “no-one can know false propositions”). Second, there would be certain “if... then...”-type non-substantive philosophical truths (such as “if the thesis of phenomenal intentionality is true, then the contents of intentional states cannot be Russellian propositions”). Third, it would have non-substantive claims about the advantages and disadvantages of different philosophical theories (such as “the advantage of presentism is that it fits the phenomenology of the present but its disadvantage is that presentism cannot provide truth-makers for true propositions about the past”). Finally, it would contain some negative truths, i.e. the falsity of certain substantive and positive philosophical theses (such as “Leibniz’s thesis according to which ‘every true claim is analytic’”).

## 2. Philosophers with high epistemic self-esteem—belief in philosophical superiority

Many philosophers set out to identify substantive philosophical truths and justify them using knock-down arguments. That is to say, they attempt to provide deductive arguments (or arguments which can be presented in deductive form) with premises that cannot be rationally denied by anyone with a sufficient understanding of them as well as the epistemic reasons for the premises, along with a conclusion that logically and validly follows on from the premises.<sup>5</sup>

Numerous philosophers firmly believed (and still believe) that they had successfully achieved their goal: they solved a particular substantive philosophical problem. That is, they found the right answer to a particular philosophical question; they know some philosophical truths. We call these philosophers, with some sarcasm to it, “I’m the only one” philosophers.

Of course, any “I’m the only one” philosopher is familiar with the pervasive and permanent disagreement among philosophers. Such a philosopher just believes that she, *as opposed to* her predecessors and contemporaries, is the one (the *only* one) who finally presented knock-down arguments for her philosophical theses on a substantive philosophical issue. Hence, the fact that the community of philosophers as a whole does not know substantive philosophical truths is irrelevant to her—because if she has, in fact, knock-down arguments for her philosophical theses, then it is of little bearing that other philosophers disagree with her.

Clearly, “I’m the only one” philosophers have *high* epistemic self-esteem concerning some (or all) of their substantive philosophical beliefs, which provides them with the basis for self-attributing epistemic authority and acting accordingly in a sincere manner. Nowadays, it is not *comme-il-faut* to openly defend this kind of philosophical self-interpretation at formal academic events or in talks or papers, but in more private and less formal conversations between academics many pitifully decry the awareness and cognitive abilities of dissenting colleagues. Nonetheless, in the past, not all philosophers were so shy. For example, Moritz Schlick assessed himself, his comrades and those who cannot see that there has already been a decisive turn in philosophy (thanks to him and his comrades) in the following way:

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<sup>5</sup> See Ballantyne (2014) for a definition of a knock-down argument.

I refer to [...] anarchy of philosophical opinions which has so often been described, in order to leave no doubt that I am fully conscious of the scope and weighty significance of the conviction, that I should now like to express. For I am convinced that we now find ourselves at an altogether decisive turning point in philosophy and we are objectively justified in considering that an end has come to fruitless conflict of systems. [...]

Certainly there will still be many a rear-guard action. Certainly many will for centuries continue to wander further along the traditional paths. Philosophical writers will long continue to discuss the old pseudo-questions. But in the end they will no longer be listened to; they will come to resemble actors who continue to play for some time before noticing that the audience has slowly departed. (Schlick 1930-31/1959, p. 54 & 59)

At this point, it is worth focusing on a metaphilosophical approach proposed by the seemingly most determined critics of the metaphilosophical approach of the “I’m the only one” philosophers. But who, in fact, follow in the footsteps of the “I’m the only one” philosophers in re-establishing high epistemic self-esteem. In the light of the so-called “metaphilosophical scepticism” or “meta-scepticism” (Brennan 2010), it seems even more plausible that the restoration of *high* epistemic self-esteem goes hand in hand with an epistemic devaluation of dissenting philosophers.

Meta-sceptics claim that all “I’m the only one” philosophers are delusional in attributing first-order substantive philosophical knowledge to themselves. The meta-sceptics argue that there is only one (second-order) philosophical truth that can be revealed by (meta)philosophy. And this truth is that: philosophy is an unreliable instrument for finding (first order) truths.<sup>6</sup> What is more, that metaphilosophical truth is proved by the pervasive and permanent disagreement over first-order philosophical truths (Brennan 2010, p. 3). Hence, meta-sceptics argue that philosophers cannot rationally believe their substantive (first-order) philosophical views and so have to suspend or abandon their substantive (first-order) philosophical beliefs.

Contrary to the “I’m the only one” philosophers, meta-sceptics aim to develop a meta-philosophical position that does not deny the epistemic relevance of the pervasive and permanent philosophical

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<sup>6</sup> We should point out that the meta-sceptics and first-order sceptics hold different attitudes towards first-order philosophical beliefs. First-order sceptics argue against the existence of knowledge in a specific domain (moral, perceptual, metaphysical, etc.). It does not follow from first-order scepticism that first-order philosophical knowledge is impossible in any domain. In contrast, meta-sceptics claims that any first-order philosophical knowledge is impossible.

disagreement. However, to make the epistemic consequences of the disagreement clear, *as epistemic authorities* on this matter they have to re-establish their *high* epistemic self-esteem concerning the epistemic relevance of disagreement. And they do exactly that. Their metaphilosophy claims that the disagreement provides a knock-down argument for the impossibility of first-order substantive philosophical knowledge. And those philosophers who do not recognize the irresistibility of the argument from disagreement are blinded by their philosophical presuppositions, goals or misleading cognitive mechanisms. Thus, meta-sceptics have to devalue the epistemic status of each and every philosopher who does not accept their meta-sceptical conclusion in the same way as “I’m the only one” philosophers devalue the epistemic status of their rivals.

To summarize the comparison: both “I’m the only one” philosophers and meta-sceptics regard themselves as philosophers who have substantive philosophical knowledge and on the basis of this assessment, they attribute epistemic authority to themselves. In other words, members of both groups firmly believe they have knock-down arguments for—at least one—substantive philosophical proposition. The main difference is that “I’m the only one” philosophers attribute substantive *first-order* philosophical knowledge to themselves while meta-sceptics believe that they have *second-order or metaphilosophical* knowledge. But, in spite of this difference, when faced with the pervasive and permanent disagreement, none of them can avoid the fact that they can restore their own high epistemic self-esteem only by devaluing their opponents’ epistemic status.

Although it is true that, by the means of the devaluative attitude towards their rivals, “I’m the only one” philosophers and meta-sceptics succeed in restoring their high level of epistemic self-esteem, we consider this cognitive manoeuvre problematic for several reasons.

First, the cost of maintaining high epistemic self-esteem by the devaluation of other philosophers is that those deploying this strategy can no longer regard other, dissenting, philosophers as their epistemic peers. That means, regardless of whether the person is an “I’m the only one” philosopher or a meta-sceptic, she can maintain a high level of epistemic self-esteem only if she believes her epistemic position is *far superior* to others’ and that she has privileged access to philosophical truths. Accordingly, she can only regard the dissenting philosophers as epistemically inferior to her—and this includes philosophers who are her friends and whom she would otherwise hold in high esteem. In short, in the face of pervasive and permanent disagreement, high epistemic self-esteem has to be rooted in the *devaluation* of epistemic abilities and performances of other philosophers. A philoso-

pher's high epistemic self-esteem can only be restored if she believes her rivals do not understand her arguments and—to put it bluntly—are unable to see how compelling these arguments are; in other words, her rivals are irrational and have fallen victim to a cognitive malfunction. In our view, the cost of this devaluation of other philosophers is so high that it is extremely doubtful whether it is worth doing to maintain high epistemic self-esteem.

Second, there is a *danger* that successfully maintaining high epistemic self-esteem by other philosophers' epistemic activities and capacities comes at the cost of succumbing to the epistemic vice of *epistemic narcissism*. Note that there is a frightening similarity between the attitudes of the narcissists and the “I am the only one”/meta-sceptic philosophers toward themselves and others:

Narcissists (i.e., those scoring high on narcissism scales) feel superior to others, believe they are entitled to privileges, and crave respect and admiration from others. They are certain that the world would be a much better place if they ruled it. We focus on prototypical narcissists: the grandiose types who feel superior to others on agentic traits (e.g., competence, intelligence, uniqueness) rather than on communal traits (e.g., kindness, helpfulness, warmth; [...]). By contrast, high self-esteemers (i.e., those scoring high on self-esteem scales) feel satisfied with themselves as a person but do not necessarily feel superior to others. (Brummelman, E., Thomaes, S., & Sedikides, C., 2016, p. 8-9)

Of course, we are not claiming that all “I’m the only one” philosophers and meta-sceptics are epistemic narcissists. Nevertheless, it is *reasonable to suspect*—given the striking similarity with everyday narcissism—that the metaphilosophies of “I’m the only one” philosophers and meta-sceptics are manifestations of epistemic narcissism. If the psychological mechanisms resembling the psychological mechanisms of epistemic narcissism explain why people choose “I’m the only one” metaphilosophy or metascepticism, then adopting either is a serious epistemic error even if the “I’m the only one” philosophers’ or the meta-sceptics’ claims happen to be true.

Third, and we think this is the main difficulty for both meta-scepticism and the “I’m the only one”-type of metaphilosophy, the proponents of these metaphilosophical approaches do not reflect upon the fact that their theoretical rivals have the same epistemic right to attribute epistemic superiority to themselves from their epistemic point of view as their proponents do from their epistemic point of view. For example, if an “I’m the only one”-type of atheist has the epistemic right to explain why



a theist disagrees with her about the soundness of the “argument from evil” based on the supposition that the theist is less competent than she is, then the “I’m the only one”-type theist has the same epistemic right to explain the disagreement by devaluing the atheist philosopher’s epistemic abilities. Of course, if either had evidence for the superiority of one independently of the disagreement over the soundness of the argument and other related issues, then one of them would have a greater epistemic right to attribute epistemic superiority to herself than the other. But the problem is that in the vast majority of cases there is no such independent evidence.

Put somewhat differently, both the meta-sceptics and the “I’m the only one” philosophers can justify their epistemic superiority and high epistemic self-esteem in a circular manner only. Namely, in order to maintain their high epistemic self-esteem, they have to convince themselves their rivals are epistemically inferior to them. But, if anyone questioned them about why they regarded their interlocutors as epistemically inferior, it would ultimately become clear that their only answer is that they are the only ones with the substantive philosophical knowledge.

In the face of the pervasive and permanent philosophical disagreement, any philosopher could rightfully regard herself as an epistemic authority on the truth of a substantive philosophical proposition in order to preserve her high epistemic self-esteem. But she can do this only in one case: if she had evidence that was *independent of* her first-order or metaphilosophical insights or arguments that supported the epistemic inferiority of *all* her rivals. However, no-one has provided such evidence yet.<sup>7</sup>

One could object that it is misleading to consider the group of professional philosophers a united epistemic community in any sense because philosophical schools use completely different philosophical methods and accept a variety of presuppositions. What is more, it is reasonable to suppose

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<sup>7</sup> Our map of the possible metaphilosophical positions would be more complete if it contained a separate section on the metaphilosophical approach which holds that philosophical problems and philosophical beliefs are meaningless. According to this metaphilosophy (the late Wittgenstein being the most well-known proponent), the only meaningful purposes of philosophy are (a) to expose the mechanism responsible for the emergence of (illusory) philosophical problems and (b) to elaborate an effective therapy that would cure each philosophically infected person of time-wasting and self-consuming worry about philosophical problems.

We have not done this because we have, *mutates mutandis*, the same objections to it as we have concerning the “I’m the only one” and meta-sceptical metaphilosophy. That is, Wittgensteinians have to have high epistemic self-esteem concerning substantive metaphilosophical propositions, just as meta-sceptics do because Wittgensteinians regard themselves as people who *know* that other philosophers’ works are meaningless. Thus, (1) they have to regard other philosophers as epistemically inferior to them since they do not recognize that they themselves are trying to solve meaningless problems; (2) there is a fear that debunking the meaninglessness of philosophy is, in fact, the manifestation of epistemic narcissism; and (3) they can only justify their epistemic superiority and high epistemic self-esteem in a circular manner.

that one is epistemically more reliable in revealing philosophical truths than others. Thus, philosophers belonging to the most reliable philosophical group could rightfully attribute epistemic superiority, philosophical knowledge and the ability to recognize philosophical reliability in others to themselves.

As far as we can tell, this objection simply iterates the problem. In order for people to rationally attribute epistemic superiority to themselves and their epistemic group, they have to justify the claim that the members of their epistemic group are more reliable than others by providing evidence for that claim. But this justification cannot be based on the simple fact that members of other philosophical schools do not agree with the first group's position on the truth-value of substantive philosophical propositions. Because, once again, it would be circular to argue: "I know that the methods of my epistemic group are more reliable than my rivals' methods because our methods demonstrate what the true solutions of the philosophical problems are, and I know that I (and not my rivals) see what the true solutions of the philosophical problems are because I (and not my rivals) belong to a group that deploys more reliable methods than other groups."

### 3. Philosophers with moderate epistemic self-esteem—philosophical beliefs without knowledge

Many contemporary philosophers are ambivalent on scepticism about philosophy. They share the meta-sceptic view in that they think philosophers cannot formulate compelling arguments for their theories and cannot present well-founded and consensually accepted substantive philosophical truths against their rivals. However, they are opposed to the meta-sceptic position in that they do not consider the correct approach to this failure to be for philosophers to suspend their philosophical beliefs and their standard (everyday) philosophical practice. According to these philosophers, the purpose of philosophy is not to find knock-down arguments or to suspend judgment. But as David Lewis puts it in his preface to Volume I of *Philosophical Papers*:

The reader in search of knock-down arguments in favor of my theories will go away disappointed. Whether or not it would be nice to knock disagreeing philosophers down by sheer force of argument, it cannot be done. Philosophical theories are never refuted conclusively.  
[...]

Our ‘intuitions’ are simply opinions; our philosophical theories are the same. Some are commonsensical, some are sophisticated; some are particular, some general; some are more firmly held, some less. But they are all opinions, and a *reasonable goal for a philosopher is to bring them into equilibrium*. Our common task is to *find out what equilibria there are that can withstand examination*, but remains for each of us to come to rest at one or another of them. (Lewis 1983, p. x, emphasis is added. L. B., J. T.)

Two aspects of this quote should be stressed. First, according to Lewis, our intuitions, pre-philosophical beliefs, and firm convictions *do not need* any justification. Nonetheless, our intuitions, pre-philosophical beliefs and firm convictions have a *decisive role* in philosophical theorizing; philosophers base their theories on them because philosophical theories are the result of elaborating these intuitions, pre-philosophical beliefs and firm convictions. As Lewis notes elsewhere:

It is not the business of philosophy [...] to justify these preexisting opinions, to any great extent, but only to try to discover ways of expanding them into an orderly system. A [philosophical] analysis [...] is an attempt at systematizing our opinions [...]. It succeeds to the extent that (1) it is systematic, and (2) it respects those of our pre-philosophical opinions to which we are firmly attached. (Lewis 1973, 88; and see a similar account about philosophy in Gutting 2009, p. 225)

Second, Lewis distinguishes between the purposes of *individual* philosophers and the purposes of the *community* of philosophers. The purpose of individual philosophers is to develop theories that are in harmony or equilibrium with *their own* pre-philosophical beliefs, intuitions, or firm convictions, and to defend that equilibrium. The purpose of the community of philosophers is to present *many* well-formulated philosophical theories which can respond to objections, thereby showcasing the possible viewpoints about philosophical problems. In short, philosophy aims to populate the logical space with consistent philosophical theories.

We call this metaphilosophical vision “equilibrism” (following Beebee 2018 but we apply the term to a wider range of approaches) since this metaphilosophical view claims that it is impossible to produce knock-down arguments for substantive philosophical theories, and so we must contend ourselves with elaborating substantive philosophical theories which are in *equilibrium* with our pre-philosophical beliefs.

So, in contrast to the “I’m the only one”-type approach and meta-scepticism, equilibration does not even try to restore philosophers’ *high* epistemic self-esteem. That is because equilibration claims that philosophers have neither the substantive philosophical knowledge nor the arguments that can compel all those capable of understanding these arguments to endorse their theories. In short, equilibration does not re-establish the philosophers’ epistemic authority undermined by the pervasive and permanent disagreement between philosophers.

Nonetheless, based on the above quotes, equilibrationists have not stopped taking epistemic responsibility for their elaborated substantive philosophical theories which are in equilibrium with their pre-philosophical beliefs. They hold that agent *S* can publicly and sincerely defend her substantive philosophical theory *T*, insofar as (1) she is able to show that there are no knock-down arguments against *T*, and (2) *T* is in equilibrium with *S*’s firm pre-philosophical beliefs. Accordingly, *S* should abandon her belief in *T* *only* if *S* had pre-philosophical beliefs which are both non-suspendible for *S* and inconsistent with *T*. As this is the only case in which *S* engages in self-contradiction.

At first glance, it seems that the equilibrationist rightfully maintains *moderate* epistemic self-esteem in relation to her substantive philosophical theories. Moreover, (and this is another advantage of this approach), she is able to maintain her *moderate* epistemic self-esteem without devaluing the epistemic performance of other philosophers, falling victim to epistemic narcissism and attributing epistemic superiority to herself in a circular manner. What is more, the community of philosophers can support the equilibrationist’s attempts. If *S* cannot figure out which substantive philosophical theory is in equilibrium with her pre-philosophical beliefs, she may be able to rely on existing investigations to identify how she can develop her pre-philosophical beliefs into a consistent and coherent theory. On top of this, the community of philosophers could provide a list of the costs and benefits of these other equilibria/theories. All in all, equilibration is a well-motivated metaphilosophical approach—we have the impression that increasing numbers of philosophers interpret their philosophical practice within this framework.

But should philosophers commit to equilibration? If equilibration delivered what it promises, then it would undoubtedly be tempting to do so. However, we suspect it fails to deliver. Our objection against equilibration is not that it is too high a price for re-establishing epistemic self-esteem in relation to substantive philosophical propositions, as is the case with the “I’m the only one”-type ap-

proach and meta-scepticism. But that equilibrium is unable to re-establish a philosopher's epistemic self-esteem in relation to subjective philosophical issues—insofar as the philosopher is faced with the challenge of pervasive and permanent philosophical dissensus.

We see the problem of equilibrium as follows. Given the pervasive and permanent disagreement over the substantive philosophical questions, not only is it highly improbable that knock-down arguments are feasible (equilibrists admit this), but a related problem arises at the same time. If there are no knock-down arguments for any substantive philosophical theories but there are many rival theories on substantive philosophical issues, can anyone have good reason to *consider* her substantive philosophical theory *the true theory*?

Just think about it! Philosophers have elaborated, in relation to substantive philosophical problems, at least two, but often many more, rival theories/equilibria that are epistemically equal to each other (except for their truth-value); and yet, only one of them can be true. Now, the equilibrists consider it pointless, as the above quotes show, to justify the pre-philosophical beliefs which are the main basis of particular equilibria/theories, thereby *making it impossible* from an *objective* point of view to rank these equilibria/theories. Thus, there is no ground on which one could claim that this or that equilibrium/theory is objectively more plausible or probable than any other equilibrium/theory. The best an equilibrist can say about any particular equilibrium/theory, in light of *S's* pre-philosophical beliefs, that this or that equilibrium/theory *seems to* be more plausible or more probable *from S's point of view*.

However, if one adopts a *third-person point of view* on the relations between the theories/equilibria in which *S detaches* herself from her (unjustified) pre-philosophical beliefs, she has to see the rival equilibria/theories have the same chance of being true. More precisely, they have an equally *small* chance of being true. If it were the case (which, of course, it is not) that there are only two rival equilibria/theories competing for the truth, one could say that even in this case there is only a 50% chance of her theory/equilibrium being true and a 50% chance of it being false. She should admit that, in the final analysis, she can say only that her equilibrium is either true or false. Nevertheless, this conclusion does not provide an adequate basis for taking epistemic responsibility for an equilibrium/theory regardless of whether that equilibrium/theory is in equilibrium with the agent's pre-philosophical beliefs.

As far as we can tell, equilibrists like Lewis do not care about this problem. For them, the fact that their equilibrium/theory is only one of many equilibria/theories is relevant only in that their theory is one of those which can be defended, against which there are no knock-down arguments, and which—even if it has disadvantages—can explain many phenomena better than their rivals. To put it bluntly, they do not ask the crucial question: if all well-elaborated equilibria/theories are equally plausible from an objective point of view (since none is more advantageous unequivocally), then what reason could anyone have for regarding any theory as the *only true* theory?

The equilibrists can answer only that each philosopher should pick one by relying on her pre-philosophical beliefs. That is to say, philosophers should not even try to rank or evaluate theories/equilibria *from an objective point of view*. In our view, they thereby encourage philosophers, to *ignore* this pervasive and permanent disagreement, to *not see* their own theories as one of many, and to *stick to* their (unjustified) pre-philosophical beliefs which they cannot abandon anyway—but *only after* having denied them the possibility of knock-down arguments owing to the pervasive and permanent disagreement in philosophy.

To our minds, this attitude seems to be both epistemically fragile and reprehensible. It is epistemically fragile because all philosophers repeatedly face the pervasive and permanent disagreement. And it is *extremely difficult* for any philosopher—who does not bury her head in the sand—faced with this disagreement not to see her theory as one of many if she considers her theory to be true only because it best fits her unjustified pre-philosophical beliefs. Furthermore, the attitude which encourages philosophers to ignore the relevance of disagreement and the objective point of view is reprehensible because it suggests that philosophers need not be concerned with the fact that only one equilibrium/theory on a substantive philosophical issue can be true. However, equilibrists should care about this because it poses a formidable challenge to equilibrist metaphilosophy.

We know only one equilibrist approach which offers a solution to this problem. In contrast with Lewis-type equilibrium, this other version of equilibrium does not attempt to restore philosophers' epistemic self-esteem to the extent it provides them with a basis for regarding themselves epistemic agents with the epistemic right to publicly defend and take epistemic responsibility for their substantive philosophical beliefs. Put briefly, it does not provide a basis even for moderate self-esteem in relation to substantive philosophical propositions.

#### 4. Philosophers with low epistemic self-esteem—philosophy without philosophical beliefs

The source of the main problem with equilibrism, investigated in the previous section, is that the Lewis-type equilibrists would like to maintain their substantive philosophical *beliefs* despite not attributing knock-down arguments for their substantive philosophical *beliefs* to themselves. A radical version of equilibrism (suggested by Helen Beebee) claims that philosophers do not need to *believe* in a substantive philosophical theory in order to rationally commit themselves to that theory. Here is Beebee's suggestion:

I suggest [...] that something like van Frassen's view about "acceptance" of scientific theories can be made to solve the problem. [...] Roughly, then, the idea is that in "accepting" a scientific theory that is ontologically committed to unobservables, the scientist does not (or, at least need not) adopt the attitude of *belief* towards what the theory says about those unobservables [...].

[I]f we are not entitled to *believe* that claims of our own theories, in what sense can they truly be said to be *our* theories? How can we sincerely endorse the claims those theories make? Acceptance, I take it, is supposed to deliver sincerity. The attitude of acceptance does not, of course, constitute sincere *belief*, but it is sincere nonetheless. [...]

If something like van Frassen's notion of acceptance really can constitute a legitimate sense in which one might „take a view“, then it can, I think, be applied to the working philosopher no less than to working scientist. [...]. [I]n each case the acceptance of a theory that one cannot rationally believe serves a purpose relative to that aim. In the case of science, the aim of empirical adequacy demands that theories that posit unobservables are developed and tested, and in the case of philosophy the aim of the discovery of equilibria demands that we take on board a set of core assumptions and methodological prescriptions in order to develop and scrutinize an equilibrium position of our own that can withstand examination. (Beebee 2018, p. 20-22, emphasis in original)

Beebee sees that the main difficulty with the Lewis-type equilibrism is that these equilibrists want to maintain their substantive philosophical *beliefs* but their justification for doing so in the face of disagreement and the existence of many equilibria/theory is insufficient because it offers only the

following: “I *de facto* have pre-philosophical beliefs  $p_1, p_2, p_3$ , so I must *believe* in equilibrium/theory  $T$  because, well,  $T$  is in equilibrium with my pre-philosophical beliefs  $p_1, p_2, p_3$ ”.

Beebe offers a solution: let us distinguish the *belief* in a philosophical theory from the *acceptance* of a philosophical theory. What is the difference? The difference is that while an epistemic agent’s philosophical *beliefs* may be important to her, may matter existentially and may have many *properties* that lead us to want to maintain rather than abandon them, *acceptance* of a substantive philosophical theory has criteria *only*. Namely, one has to be able to defend the theory such that doing so is part of the process of elaborating the equilibria in increasing detail.

Thus, according to Beebe, philosophers should not set about finding an appropriate basis from which to defend their substantive philosophical *beliefs* as an aim. Rather, they should aim to elaborate as many stable equilibria as possible. However, as beliefs have properties which can bias our investigations, it is best if the philosopher has no substantive philosophical beliefs at all. If, though, the philosopher in question is unable to abandon this or that philosophical belief, she should choose a research field which has nothing to do with her stubborn substantive philosophical beliefs.

One can put it as follows: a favourable strategy would be for the philosopher to *let her epistemic self-esteem relating to her substantive philosophical beliefs* diminish to the extent that she does not even think about publicly defending them. Instead, she should *accept* a theory which when elaborated promises to reveal as many unknown *non-substantive* philosophical truths as possible.

It is clear that the value of elaborated philosophical equilibria is not based on that epistemic agents with substantive philosophical beliefs can adopt them, believe in them with all sincerity and restore their epistemic self-esteem to a moderate degree at least by committing themselves to one of these equilibria. The value of the elaborated equilibria is independent of these goals. This Beebe-type equilibrism says that there is no need to restore the epistemic self-esteem that have been undermined by the pervasive and permanent disagreement over substantive philosophical problems. Moreover, because of the dissensus and other epistemic problems, it is good if a philosopher does have *low* epistemic self-esteem in relation to her substantive philosophical beliefs and does not defend them publicly. In contrast, a philosopher can have high epistemic self-esteem in relation to non-substantive philosophical beliefs because she may rightfully regard herself as being among



those able to help elaborate a more resilient and more detailed version of any equilibrium (without believing in any of them) owing to their knowledge of the cost and benefits of the theories.

Beebee's approach has two notable advantages. First, like with the Lewis-type equilibrium, those who adopt this metaphilosophy do not have to devalue the epistemic performance of other philosophers. And there can be no suspicion of epistemic narcissism. Second, *in contrast to* the Lewis-type equilibrium, in Beebee's vision, philosophers' epistemic self-esteem is independent of the status of their substantive philosophical beliefs. Instead, philosophers' epistemic self-esteem is based on their contribution to a philosophical project that is distinct from justifying substantive philosophical beliefs, by uncovering an ever-increasing number of non-substantive philosophical truths. More precisely, the epistemic self-esteem of a philosopher should be based on the exploration of novel philosophical equilibria. Thus, Beebee's equilibrium avoids the difficulty that the philosopher has to believe in her substantive philosophical theories/equilibria despite there being no appropriate basis for doing so given that pre-philosophical beliefs are unjustified.

However, there is another difficulty with Beebee's approach. According to the Lewis-type equilibrium, the point of elaborating a philosophical theory/equilibrium is that it expands our pre-philosophical beliefs into an orderly system in which we can *believe*. Nevertheless, Beebee rejects the idea that the point of elaborating philosophical theories/equilibria is so that some agents can believe in them, even though both the Lewis-type equilibrists and common sense suggest that. So, the question regarding Beebee's approach remains: what is the value of elaborated philosophical theories/equilibria?

The first possible answer is that elaborated theories/equilibria are valuable in and of themselves. Elaborating and understanding them can be entertaining, interesting and even amusing. However, the problem with this answer is that it diminishes the point of doing philosophy. Philosophy becomes an intellectual sport or game and loses its deeper meaning. It is problematic also because the epistemic self-esteem based on philosophical knowledge does not significantly contribute to improving the philosopher's overall epistemic self-esteem. Let us recall: the minimal definition of overall epistemic self-esteem claims that one of the relevant components of overall epistemic self-esteem is the extent to which the epistemic agent regards her epistemic activity as meaningful. Obviously, if the epistemic agent cannot see any deeper meaning in her epistemic activity, then the knowledge produced by such epistemic activities do not increase her overall epistemic self-esteem.

If a person learned the address of every philosophy department by heart only because she could not figure out a better way to kill time, then the self-assessment of her performance as an epistemic agent would be no better after the process since the acquired knowledge had no meaning for her.

Another possible answer is that those philosophical theories/equilibria which are accepted and defended without belief have some positive effects on the life of individuals or the society as a whole. However, we consider this an unjustified supposition, especially if one takes into account that Beebee's approach only that if someone defends a philosophical theory *solely* in the ivory tower of academic discourse. To put it differently, in Beebee's approach one cannot justify philosophers targeting a wider audience. This is because if a philosopher's line of argument for a substantial philosophical theory targets a wider audience, she may have no other reasonable goal than convincing this wider audience; but convincing people to *believe* in a philosophical theory cannot be an appropriate aim for a philosopher—according to Beebee's approach. If a philosopher chooses to defend a philosophical theory outside the academic discourse, it would be unreasonable to do this in the hope that the general audience can help her map the advantages and disadvantages of her theory. Academic audiences are much better for this purpose. Nevertheless, if a philosopher confines herself to investigating the advantages and disadvantages of different philosophical theories—trying hard *not* to convince anyone about any substantial philosophical claim –, she cannot reasonably hope that her philosophical activity will have a considerable effect on society or indeed anyone.

## Summary

We have argued that “I’m the only one” philosophers and meta-sceptics have to attribute epistemic superiority to themselves and regard dissenting philosophers as victims of a cognitive and epistemic malfunction so they can maintain their high epistemic self-esteem in the face of pervasive and permanent philosophical disagreement. In contrast, if a philosopher interprets her philosophical activity in the spirit of equilibrism and gives up on both high epistemic self-esteem and the pursuit of substantive philosophical knowledge, there is a worry—regardless of whether she adopts Lewis-type equilibrism or Beebee's approach—that she also has to give up on the idea that philosophy can contribute to the defence and justification of substantive philosophical beliefs. However, in the process, the point and deeper meaning of doing philosophy is lost along with how non-substantive philosophical knowledge can contribute to improving overall epistemic self-esteem.

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